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GENDER-BASED ALIENATION :  
A FEMINIST/MATERIALIST THEORY OF RAPE.

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Women are alienated from potency as members of humankind . This is both a subjective and objective phenomenon, an experience of womanhood in patriarchal society. However, I will not outline the concepts of objective and subjective alienation; rather I will attempt to explain the nature of gender-based (or sexual) alienation in such a way as to expound a feminist theory of rape which takes as central the structural nature of social relations.

The act of rape defies 'intrapsychic' explanations of behaviour. It is far more readily explained in terms of a mode of interaction between people operating within socially prescribed sex roles, where each role is accorded differing amounts of physical and structural power. For these reasons, I wish to concentrate my efforts at a definition of alienation in terms of social roles. This incorporates the following notions :

- experienced contradictions between expectations of different roles prescribed for people;
- the limitation of behaviour/thought to spheres within the prescriptions;
- the limitation of roles available to men and women; and
- conflicting values placed on different roles.

Recognising that these roles and their associated values are rooted in the structure of patriarchal society is essential to a feminist understanding of rape and alienation.

Sex 'appropriate' roles are communicated to and assimilated by children during the process of socialisation - a process equipping us for our incorporation into the real world of social relations. These social relations are defined by the structures of capitalist patriarchy and exist as class and sex divisions. Gender is divided into male and female/ masculine and feminine/ powerful and powerless. Human sexual relations (ie. relations between men and women) become distorted and, based on a power differential, exploitative. The nature of these relations allows for the possibility of rape.

An expression of sexual alienation and simultaneously a result of it, rape is defined as the experience of forced sexual contact, whether that force is physical (actual or threatened) or emotional. A more radical analysis, which is outside the scope of this brief, would include structural forces eg. women consenting to non-mutual sex out of a woman's 'obligation' to satisfy men.

Gender relations, and the existence of rape are perpetuated by a pervasive ideology consisting of idea and action. Ideology as idea is expressed in attitudes towards women and rape, in the structuring of family life and in many other spheres. Ideology as action includes the act of rape, or its possibility. The effect of rape on the consciousness of humans is to perpetuate the ideology of male supremacy using 'bully boy' tactics, for example forcing women to acknowledge their own passivity. These tactics



are themselves firmly based in the structure of gender relations.

Although they should be implicit in the body of this brief, I would like to outline the origins of sexual alienation. Essentially, alienation grows out of power relations between people. Sexual alienation is inherent in the polarisation of human subjects into masculine and feminine which is in itself alienating, but also allows for further alienation through differential allocation of power. Alienation of men and women in capitalist patriarchy, begins at the moment of birth with the prescription of gender identity on the basis of genital sex. Structurally, power is then allocated according to one's gender, but simultaneously the development of individual psyches occurs along lines in support of and for the maintenance of gender based relations of power. (This occurs because the ideology of patriarchy operates via and is inherent in, the practices of the various socialising institutions). These relations of power are expressed in rape.

Social definitions of masculine and feminine are in fact descriptions of contrasting forms - strong/weak, dominant/submissive, aggressive/passive, sexually assertive/sexually controllable. Not only do these polarised characteristics give evidence of as well as determine the alienation of each gender, they also illuminate a scenario where each gender is alienated from the "opposite sex". Men and women are socialised into adopting characteristics which are supposedly complementary, but become incompatible with co-operation (being opposite,

differentially valued and associated with differential access to power) and serve to structure a relationship of exploitation.

For the sake of clarity I would like to outline the material (physical and socio-political) conditions which not only determine the occurrence of rape but legitimate it as well. I hope to show that rape is simultaneously an indirect consequence, an expression, a direct consequence and a determinant of alienation.

1) "(Women are) powerless by definition and in fact" (Dworkin, 1976, p43). Female socialisation into the physically weaker gender allows women to be overpowered by the physically stronger male. Men are socialised into developing a physique rendering them capable of subduing a female victim.

2) Male socialisation into the sexually potent gender allows men to rationalise the use of force in order to gain sexual access to a victim who, it is commonly believed, has no sexuality independent of male sexuality.

3) Men are taught to turn their frustration into anger, aggression and direct it outwards. They thus become aggressors. Women are taught to turn frustration inwards and become depressed and weakened, thus entrenching their status as victims.

4) Women's economic dependence on men may create sexual obligations from which men may bargain/coerce for sexual access.



result of the structural definitions of sexuality and the historical conditions within which it is experienced.

Rape is seen as an act of systematic, structural violence against women. It serves a control function in patriarchy while simultaneously reflecting, maintaining and facilitating patriarchy. Rape is "A gross and extreme form of social regulation by which woman is brutally stripped of her humanity" (Metzger, 1976, p405).

#### References

Dworkin, Andrea Our Blood.

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